Year Three

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/4552872.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Hannibal (TV), Hannibal Lecter Series - All Media Types
Relationships:	Will Graham & Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Jimmy Price/Brian Zeller, Will Graham & Beverly Katz, Hannibal Lecter & Beverly Katz
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Jack Crawford, Beverly Katz, Molly Foster, Brian Zeller, Jimmy Price, Paul Krendler
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Hogwarts, Friendship, Friends to Lovers, Slow Burn, First Kiss, Jealous Hannibal, Awkward Will, No but really Hannibal never learned to share
Language:	English
Series:	Part 3 of Alternative Means of Influence
Stats:	Published: 2015-08-11 Completed: 2015-09-03 Words: 14,924 Chapters: 16/16

Year Three

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Summary

“Who among us doesn’t want understanding and acceptance?”
—Jack Crawford, Secondo

It is strange, to think that someone might really be able to see him for who he is and accept him, but Hannibal begins to entertain that notion. Meanwhile, exploding snap, quidditch games, Hogsmeade, and Will wondering what it might be like for someone to look at *him* like that...

Part of a multi-fic series, updates twice a week. Harry Potter AU, catch up from the beginning!

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will

It's a whole new feeling, coming back to school and looking forward to it.

I had nervous coils through me the whole trip to the station, kept pulling out the bundle of letters, shuffling through to read and re-read them. Bev's were even more a mess than last year, sometimes containing dust, or crumbs, sometimes singed; I got one with a weird looking herb pressed into it, and marvelled at the fact that the postal service let that one slide (I suspect enchantment). In contrast, Hannibal's stack is pristine, all addressed in his careful hand, signed with the same flourished H.L. that makes me smile every time.

It's weird, to be with him in person. I think for the first time I really understand his frustration. All his letters are *pages* long, intelligent, funny, full of words like "antediluvian." (Far from the only one that sent me to the dictionary mid-letter.) He's not quiet by nature, he's fascinating, and nobody takes the time to notice. It must be annoying to limit your vocabulary to things that can be written quickly enough to not cause pause in conversation. Maybe that's why he wrote me so often; the need to just be able to freely express to someone. It definitely can't have been for my enthralling conversation. Like last year, I often looked at the contents of my own messy responses and cringed before sending them.

Honestly, I almost expected him to answer me back when I all but fell into the train compartment, grinning around my "hello." The Hannibal who wrote me all summer would have likely stood with a line like: "Why hello, Will. I've long anticipated our meeting again." I have to remind myself that *that* Hannibal and the one who offered a prim nod in place of a greeting are one and the same. He was genuinely happy to see me though, I could tell by the smile he tried to twist away and failed, the way he quickly moved his bag from the seat beside him; he'd saved me a spot.

Of course, it didn't take Bev long to find us. She looked great, taller than I'd last seen her, hair loose from its usual ponytail, and of course, trailed by Brian. There was another kid with them too, a Hufflepuff I vaguely knew, thin and pale, armed with an infectious grin and at least a hundred "fun facts" that I barely listened to as they chattered away.

Hannibal watched all of this with a carefully neutral expression, but I could feel the quiet frustration simmering just beneath, the longing. I took a scrap of parchment from my bag.

Good to be back?

I nudged his knee with mine, and he startled. *Sorry*, I mouthed, then nodded down.

When he saw the note, his eyes crinkled into that secret smile, and he took the quill I offered.

Good to see you. Do you miss the fireflies and the...

He paused, frowning, then brightened again.

lawn-mowers?

I stifled a laugh and scribbled back, conscious, as always, of how poor my handwriting was next to his.

Yes, and absolutely not.

I had mowed lawns all summer for spending money, a tedious job that apparently does not exist in the wizarding community, going by the horrified tone of Hannibal's response the first time I'd mentioned it.

And just like that, it was okay. He and I wrote back and forth, I paid just enough attention to the others' conversations to interject where necessary, and it was as though I'd never left.

Oh, and we ran into our old friend Krendler on the way into the Great Hall. I'm pleased to say he was as ugly as ever, and his hands looked free of scars. He shot us a rude gesture with them over the heads of some first years. Hannibal winked, and Bev and I laughed when Krendler scowled even deeper and scurried away.

Chapter End Notes

Extra Credit

If you've ever wondered something about the "Alternative Means" verse, I have compiled a few common questions on the fic's tumblr, here. If you have a question about the characters, the world, or one for the authors (oh, gosh, for us?) that we haven't answered there, please feel free to shoot us an ask. We love questions almost as much as Will loves new dogs, so we'll probably address it pretty quickly.

Oh, and uh... it's good to be back :)
—Q

Chapter 2

Hannibal

Journal,

We fall into our rhythms together.

For a moment, the sheer mass of people around me inclines me back to my old ways. A compartment of my own, glares to keep away intruders, wafting music from the little player my Aunt bought for me over the break, and a book or two, perhaps a sketch of the journey. It is always a nice journey, the forests curving into streams, the clouds drifting across the expanse of sky. In the limbo of the train there is endless possibility, no one expects that I can or cannot do this, no one prods at my silence or notices my lack of words. In it I am alone and I am content.

But not this year.

This year there is clatter, a whirl of motion and noise into my quiet spaces, disorder of sorts, disheveledness at least, his uniform is not on yet, and there are stains on the too large t-shirt he wears, some loud design on the front that I cannot identify, that comes curling in to upset the usual way.

In the emptiness of space that is, has always been mine to control, he sits down without hesitation, and I, it would seem, move myself to make room without another thought, invite him before the slightest consideration of anything else might even occur to me. A strange new reflex, almost too fast to snatch my bag from the seat so that he can be more comfortable. So he can sit in the spot that truly, was meant for him. That this year, I glared and narrow-eyed to keep… not… not for me, but for me.

So that he would not go anywhere else. If there is a seat, he must sit. Will is not—tries not to be—rude.

It is true that he is sound and mess inside the neatness of my norm, but he comes with a bright smile down at me as he sits, as I turn to look up at him, eyes widening when our gazes meet and the light seeps over me. I find, with the sudden curve up of my lips that I tuck away, morph into a nod, more appropriate that, well. That I appreciate the company.

His presence, here, real and beside me.

My Friend Will.

He grins at me as though I am something well worth seeing, as though it is me alone that causes the grin. I allow him a small smile and it broadens.

The rest of them tumble in, their own hues of being filling the air, but despite the intrusion, it as though we are alone, in a shared place that only we can go, our pens drawing along the page, building it larger around us. He wanders in and out, appeases them with speech I would never be able to maintain, Bev's breathless churn of word, and that new friend of Brian's with his constant scattering of speech. (Though it is true, even *I* did not know that fact about bees, which I will not repeat here.) But he always returns, manifests words between us in the atrocious scrawl that suits him, builds our world, my world, a little bigger. Joins me where I can go, instead of expecting me to attempt to find him. And for once, there is someone who stays.

Fascinating, though the rest of them may be.

We part as we cross into the Great Hall and he tells Bev and Brian to go ahead. Waits with me a moment longer, shifting when I turn a questioning eye in his direction, and then awkwardly he dashes forward to wrap arms around me for a moment, before pulling away. A little flushed, the anxious scent like before an exam lingering around him, nervous as though he is worried I might explode on us both.

"I'll see you later."

The words come emphatically, when I give no response, merely stare at him, uncertain. Find it in me to spare another smile and a nod.

Okay.

He turns to go, shaking his head to himself, but I do not find my place yet. Stand rather foolishly in the middle of the streaming flood of students and watch him.

Friends… hug.

I think about Bev throwing an arm around his shoulder, about the way Jimmy all but jumped into Brian's arms, the two of them hooting together.

I suppose that is a fact.

Perhaps one day I will attempt.

For now, there is a sorting and I find a certain anticipation rising in me that has nothing to do with classes or wands.

Chapter 3

Will

Hogsmeade was… great. Amazing. To think I almost didn't go! Hannibal was, well, being Hannibal. Big crowds are as hard for him as they are for me—worse, maybe. There's not much chance to interject when everyone is talking at once, so I understand. But to refuse *Hogsmeade*? It's a rite of passage! And I told him we'd sneak off from the group if it got too much, take a break from the rush, but he pursed his lips and went on with the essay he was working on, ignoring the notes I kept slipping him just as easily as he ignored Bev's continued wheedling.

Luckily, *she* wasn't going to let me sit and sulk with him in the Slytherin dorm, much as I was tempted to.

"Come on Graham, he'll come next time. We'll make him so jealous with all the fun we have, he won't be able to resist." she grinned, elbowing me. Hannibal pretended he didn't notice us, a trick he employs often; becoming conveniently hard of hearing.

"That is, if you two can detach yourselves for a whole night," she added with a roll of her eyes.

Which is... which is *completely* unfair, because I spend just as much time with her. Or, well, close anyways.

Devious methods aside, I am glad that she convinced me. The stores! The sounds and smells, and everyone's excitement combined, a warm and electric atmosphere that tuned me to giddiness, made me almost lightheaded. We managed to get a table at the Three Broomsticks, because Jimmy (Brian's Hufflepuff friend) got there quickly and spread his things over our seats, earning more than a few reproachful glares from the older students. We sat and talked, and drank butterbeer (much better than soda, I am humbled to report) and Brian and Jimmy made Bev laugh so hard that she snorted it out of her nose (gross, but oddly endearing).

The whole time, I was just kind of baffled by the idea that this is my life. This is real; this is what awaits us in the world, that we will have a hundred of these simple moments. I have to admit, I think the butterbeer made me wane a little sentimental, and I ached when someone asked for our extra chair, the one that Hannibal belongs in. But I think that, in his own time, he'll fill that place.

Then we did the whole tour; we went in every shop at least once. I wish I had unlimited Galleons, so that I could buy everything I saw, I wish that I could bundle it all up and take it home to show Dad. It was almost an overload though, all of this at once, and on top of that, I was having a really hard time shutting everyone else out, and starting to get a headache. I kept getting little snippets of conversation and the emotions associated with them, all these fingers fumbling crudely around in my head, making it hard to focus on one thing. While Jimmy and Brian bickered outside of the joke shop, I told Bev I was going back to

Honeyduke's, that I'd remembered something I wanted to buy. She nodded, understanding flickering across her face, and I loved her for it.

It was only half an excuse. I wandered past the main sprawl of shops, into the brittle autumn air at the edge of the surrounding forest. The silence was like a balm on my feverish head, the cold jarring and good, and I sucked in breath after shaky breath. Only the last rattling husks of leaves whispered to me out there. And in time, I felt ready to go back.

Had Hannibal been with me, I would have allowed him in that space. Far from distracting, his is the only presence that I actually find calming.

This thought in mind, I really did loop back around to Honeydukes, hell-bent on finding some of those chocolates that I've seen in Hannibal's bag, the ones he shared with me when we sat on the Quidditch pitch last year.

As I browsed, I noticed a small cluster of Gryffindor girls whispering in the corner behind a Bertie Bott's display. They were mostly older, I think, fourth years, and they kept looking over in my direction. Self-consciousness clenched my stomach suddenly, wondering if my robes were twisted or something, and I grit my teeth to ignore the overwhelming urge to adjust my glasses. My face must have turned red, because they all looked away quickly, and giggled.

Now utterly flustered, I picked the candies that looked the most like the kind that Hannibal favors, dumped some in a bag, and hurried to check out. When, once, I glanced over to see if they had gone, the blonde one with the ponytail and the Quidditch sweater smiled broadly at me and waved.

Oh.

I have to admit, even thinking about it now, I get a weird kind of fluttery feeling in my stomach. But at the time, because I'm Will Graham, and a huge moron, I just thanked the teller and rushed out. To an encore of more giggles, I'm sure.

Chapter 4

Hannibal

I do not know what he believes himself to be thinking, exactly. Engaging in such ludicrous behaviors all of a sudden. Casting not-so-furtive looks behind him throughout breakfast towards the Gryffindor table—*I* see nothing there—insisting we stop and watch Quidditch practice from the windows of North Tower. We are meant to be practicing voiceless magic, though if irritation is the key to unlocking it, I suppose I am well on my way.

And today in Charms. Pretending his quill was not working for god knows what reason precisely, and though I offered him my perfectly serviceable, far smoother, might I add, replacement, he pretended not to see my note and instead, tapped *her* on the shoulder to ask if he could borrow one. Stumbling over his words and blushing as though it were some great discomfort he was creating.

She didn't seem to think so at any rate, all that grinning and whispering. More blushing. *Spare* me. Pretty, fine, I will grant it, but not stunning. Plain, decently talented, much like more or less everyone else around us; so she flies. (Marginally decent at that as well). And has no problem saying *Will* or anything else, I suppose that's appealing.

In any case, he wishes for us to study at the pitch this afternoon, three guesses why, but if you need them, you clearly have not been paying any attention, which would only be par for the course it seems. Do not give me that face, I do not like it, and I do not have to, but I will go, of course. Will seems to think I am catching a cold or some such and he is hovering. I had better appease him with whatever he wishes before he pries too deeply and finds... I don't know what this is, whatever this is. I suppose I had better bring a book and not expect too much in the way of mutual work. There will likely be too much flushed cheering and leaning keenly forward in the, rather uncomfortable, I might add, stadium seats for that.

Is this better than before? It doesn't feel much like it, this burn at the edges, coiled choking.

But—he’s hovering, not the time to consider this. ENOUGH WILL, I AM NOT ILL.

H. L.

Chapter 5

Will

Her name is Molly Foster.

The girl, that is, the one who smiled at me in Honeydukes that day. I was walking to class with Bev and Jimmy, and she passed us with a group of her friends. She didn't see me, was too busy laughing a little nose-scrunched laugh, but I almost stumbled in the middle of the corridor, turning my head.

"Who is that?" I asked, aware that my voice was unnecessarily loud. That odd feeling was bubbling back, warming my cheeks and my chest. Jimmy gave me a very confused look.

"Who?"

"That girl, the one who just passed with the—" I gestured helplessly, trying to describe her hair, her eyes, her sly grin, and failing to produce the right words.

"He's talking about Molly Foster," Bev interrupted, a decidedly mischievous lilt to her voice. When my mouth fell open, she grinned.

"That's right, Casanova— I know all about your little encounter at Hogsmeade."

"How—"

"Don't worry, I didn't suddenly develop your weird powers or anything," she laughed. "We played Gryffindor last week, remember? She was talking about you with another chaser before we hit the pitch."

Jimmy wiggled his eyebrows.

"Uh oh, Graham's got an admirer?"

"Shut up," I said, but I was grinning, which probably ruined the effect a little. Molly Foster. Her name is Molly Foster, and she was asking about me.

"I wonder what attracted her: the air of surliness? The inexplicably blue eyes?" he teased, "Maybe the perpetually uncombed hair, that must be it"

I spluttered helplessly, but Bev was already shaking her head.

"Well, yes and no. I think she's got a boyfriend."

Oh.

“They’re both on the Quidditch team.”

I must have frowned, because she shot me a strange, searching look.

“Besides, I think Will has his eye on someone else.”

There was a question in her voice, but I didn’t particularly care to decipher it just then. I made a face at her, and changed the subject.

I mean, it’s not like it matters. I don’t even know her, not really. Molly Foster, who plays quidditch for Gryffindor, and smiles at strangers in Honeydukes. But for a second I thought… I thought it just might be…

I sometimes think I’d like to have someone look at me like that. I’ve been in so many minds, and I’ve glimpsed what that feels like, that bittersweet longing, that happy ache, but always as a spectator, like some kind of emotional peeping Tom. I’ve never…

This is all stupid. I’m probably just leeching off of someone else, I don’t care about pretty Chasers, or people holding hands in the hall. I’ve been slacking in my Occlumency, that must be where this is all coming from. Just someone else’s baggage.

Chapter 6

Hannibal

Well. Well. *Well.*

Did I *misunderstand* the meaning of "*We* should go study"? I did not ask to be invited, though it would be a rare evening we did not spend together. If he had said nothing, or he had said “I am going on my own tonight,” I would have—

Well, I in all likelihood would have demanded to know why and unhappily crossed my arms, made what he terms 'the Frozen Face.' Endearing, no? But is it better that I make it now?

I will tell you, it was fine, largely, until the end. Will was distracted, as I presumed, but not wholly so much that we did not exchange a good few pages of notes between us. He knows I prefer that we both write if possible, and I think he finds it halting too, in conversation, to switch mediums constantly. For a long stretch, he even seemed to forget his intended reasoning for sitting us on the pitch altogether. (As I said, *marginally* talented.) Then it was merely a pleasant hour or so, in unpleasant seating, but that coil from earlier was loosening and it was just as usual, just as I wish for it to be.

At least until we rose to go, the sky darkening slowly already, one step and then another, and then, right there at the bottom of the stairs -

"Will!"

Breathless excitement. Appearing as though she'd been magically summoned. Was she not meant to be practicing? She could certainly use it. And Will, with that lopsided curl of smile, the rather endearing one, where his features are soft and sheepish, eyes shining in the dimness. Blue against the deepening black of the sky. Mere observations.

But a smile, it would appear, that I like far less when aimed at someone else. She smiles at me for a moment, though I believe I am glaring, and something in her gaze turns confused for a heartbeat, before I can siphon away the annoyance and leave my gaze perfectly blank. At which point exactly did I lose the ability to have that as my default? Probably around the time someone insisted I smile more.

No smiles at present.

At that, she seemed only more confused, but her smile didn't falter, only moved to Will and back towards me and then Will was looking at me as well. Intrusive, you see, I had suddenly become. Almost enough to convince me to dig in my heels, stubbornly stay, but Will opened his mouth.

"Hannib-"

I will not be dismissed.

I am going in, it's getting cold, I write, show him and not her, and turn on my heel. Her laugh follows me back to the castle.

I have waited in our usual nook in the library now for the better part of an hour and he has not surfaced. I have no appetite for dinner at present, and do not think that would be helped along if I found him already there. At the incorrect, incorrect, table.

Do you think she is simply charming, journal? Or perhaps simply simple. ~~On occasion I wish I were so.~~ But I am only what I am.

H.L.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

> Someone asked us a couple of days ago on the fic's tumblr what classes Will and Hannibal chose in third year. This entry answers one of them, if you want to know the rest you can read here. Thanks to sardoneia for the question!

Will

I'm not sure how exactly I convinced Hannibal to take Divination with me, but here he is, sitting across the table from me in a warm, incense scented classroom. Looking thoroughly sorry he came here, as the professor goes on in a low, dramatic voice about the grand designs written in our tea dregs.

A note, pushed against my arm,

This is ludicrous. If we could predict the future, what is to stop us from changing it?

I grin at him, eyes flicking over to the teacher to make sure she's still monologuing on.

Maybe if you try, you end up making it come true.

He reads my scrawl with a squint, makes a face that lets me know what he thinks about that.

That is a paradox and this is foolish.

I shrug, unconcerned. To be honest, I don't have much more faith in the clairvoyant arts than he does, or interest in tea leaves; head, life, and love lines. But I like the classroom, the old, cultic charts of stars and palms that line the stone walls, the soft cushions and candles, a shelter from the grey rain that pelts the windows.

And I like that as long as I come up with a reasonably dramatic explanation for why my tea dregs have formed the vague shape of a slanted teardrop, I get good marks.

The professor is finally done lecturing, and has instructed us to take a moment and try to *listen to our inner eye*, which I find hilarious enough to need to turn my head away for a moment, so she can't see my laugh. I think I do a very good impression of solemnity when I turn back, yes, a sage nod, as I consult my chipped tea cup.

“What does yours say?” I ask Hannibal. He’s flipping through his text, as though he’s still hoping to find real, factual answers buried somewhere in the pages. He casts an unamused glance up at me, which I ignore, consulting my inner eye’s opinion on the *very* serious art of tea-leaf reading. I raise my brows, flip to a random page and tone my voice lofty and mystic,

“Mine appears to bear the marks of…” a gasp, then a low tut. I might be enjoying myself a bit too much. “*Tragedy*.”

I can almost hear his eye roll, and he scribbles something in the margins of his—surprisingly empty, for him—notes.

Are you sure it is not just a blonde ponytail?

That catches me off-guard.

“I—what do you mean?”

More baffling than that out-of-the-blue comment is the way he’s watching me, his eyes narrowed as though there’s something shameful in the suggestion. His lips part, as though there are words there that he wants to form, the empty shape of his wish to speak, and, frustrated, he turns again to the quill.

Just then the professor looms over us, a swirl of robes.

“How are we doing, hm?”

Hannibal looks down at his notes, knowing full well she won’t ask him so long as he doesn’t acknowledge her. I grapple with the tendril of unease in my chest, try to set aside the discussion and focus on what she’s asking.

“Well, uh, it looks like the leaves are forming a…”

She casts a rather hammy sympathetic look at me, rests her hand on my shoulder,

“It’s alright dear, you cannot force the leaves to speak to you. With practice, you will learn to listen.”

I nod, feeling a flush creep across my cheeks and neck, my ears burning.

“Let’s have a look, shall we?” she asks, and takes my cup between her long palms. Hannibal makes a face at me as she *hm* and *uh huhs*, and a little of that tightness in my lungs eases.

“Interesting…”

To my surprise, she then scoops up Hannibal’s as well, looks back and forth between them for a moment, squinting at the dregs as though deciphering some ancient language. A smile creeps across her face; not amusement, but something softer.

“What is it?” I ask.

I can't believe I'm suddenly putting stock in what, seconds ago, I was mocking with Hannibal, but I have to give it to her; even if there's nothing there, she puts on a great performance. Even Hannibal is watching her, though with an expression a little less eager than mine. She only smiles knowingly, repeats,

"Very Interesting." and sets our cups back down, whirls away to consult another set of china.

"That was weird," I whisper as soon as she's turned away. Hannibal is looking into his cup with renewed interest, but is shaking his head. Likely because, unsurprisingly, they have not changed position since before she grabbed them.

"Do you think she just makes this stuff up?" I laugh, lean across the table to look at the muddy colored dregs in his cup. He purses his lips as though deep in thought, and takes up the quill,

No. We are most certainly tied into some greater, perilous scheme that we have not yet become aware of.

He pauses while I read, grinning at the sear of his sarcasm, then adds,

And that, judging by most of these so-called predictions, will end in our death.

I scoff, and take the paper, the quill. I know he prefers when we write together, so I give him my silence. Our fingers brush as the quill changes hands, and I shiver, a little of that residual spark passing through me pleasantly.

Nah, that was clearly not a doom kind of Interesting, that was a good one. Riches? Glory? Maybe adventure; I bet that's it.

Another word bubbles into my mind; *romance*, but I quash it down, the heat of his glare only moments ago still fresh. Not that… not that Molly and I…

Another picture, while he takes the parchment back, and this one catches me by surprise with its intensity. I imagine reaching across the space and taking his hand, feeling the warmth of it beneath my own, tracing the lines of it with my fingertips. I... I really want to, for a moment, I feel like a mug that someone's just poured warm cocoa in, and I look around me, cheeks hot, wondering what the source is.

It is possible that when I look, nobody is even marginally aware of us at our corner table. It is possible that it is only me. Strange.

If by adventure, you mean several months of falsifying predictions, then yes. I believe that most certainly lies in our future.

I shake the strange feeling off, laugh quietly at his continued written commentary. I try not to think of tea leaves and touch.

Chapter 8

Hannibal

I am chilled, as I write this, drawing the blankets up around me to fight the cold. I am not fond of it, truly, would prefer to be warm by fire, but it was one of those nights. I awoke, the dark heavy along my shoulders, though I could not remember what exactly had torn the screams from my lips. I should, should chase the feeling when it dawns upon me in the night, wrap my fingers around it so it cannot escape my grip and I may see it plainly, but it darts away to the icy stretches into which I cannot follow.

Sleep seemed a faint hope after that, restlessness through my bones and—heedless of the cold, of the hour—I left my still sleeping classmates, crept silent through the common room. The dying embers of the hearth were tempting, but not enough to keep me. Stillness was screaming in my veins, I needed the sky, the open expanse of stars, in the veil of night. Inside, nothing seemed quite real enough to convince me of my wakening, and I do not wish to be caught in the terrors of my head. The air of the castle cramped along my skin, stifled my lungs.

Though it is supposed to be difficult to sneak about the castle at night, when I wish, I can be little more than a ghost, straightening against the wall as soon as so much as a gasp of breath came into my awareness, and I can smell, usually, the scent of another presence before it can see me. Teachers who wander nightly underestimate the strength of their bath oils and the lotions slathered on their bodies. The caretaker is so rife with age and uncleanliness, I am aware of him three hallways down and the scent of him trails, without so many others to confuse it. The echoes of all the students waft and die, nothing as uncanny as encountering my own dying trail from earlier in the day.

It becomes little more than a game, in any case, and sometimes for my own amusements, I press my own boundaries, linger to the last second, or in plain sight, until there is little but a heartbeat to hide. Tonight I played no such games, desperate to see the witching hour wind brush through the trees, the clouds haloing the moon in the sky. Beauty, raw and wild, grounds me in its own ephemeral form. The moment for me alone and then vanished, though it remains, a landscape on the wall of my mind. I often wish for beauty, before all else. So long starved from it, I presume, but it is not the time to examine the contents of my being too closely.

For a moment, the pressure lifted, the clear silent air surrounding me, and it was everything I had wished for it to be. But then, as only cold can do, freezing fingers began to burrow into my skin, sinking deep through the thin fabric of my pajamas, dew around my slippers. In my haste, I had not dressed, hadn't paused to consider much more than the notion that I could simply no longer be where I was. The nightmares seemed far, yes, but the cold, I shudder, even now that I have warmed a little, too close to fresh ones. Still, I did not wish to leave, even as the goosebumps raised higher, the shaking more rife. To go back inside, it would be to suffocate fresh.

And then, from nowhere, journal, warmth. A blanket around my shoulders, and then arms, a body tucked into mine. First impulse to stiffen and attack, second that the heat was too welcome to rid myself of. Third that it was Will, appearing to be as lost in his dreams as I was, peering at me, silhouetted in the moonlight.

I look at him, huddle as our breaths paint fog against the sky, question in my eyes, no notebook at hand. But he only shakes his head, pulls me closer, his hands grasping onto mine to warm them. He had thought of gloves and a coat, foolishness flushes my face, but I do not break the contact.

"I don't know," he murmurs, scarcely above a whisper. He seems not himself in this moment, seems entirely other, and it steals my breath more surely than the cold. Something far in his features, not the clumsy laughter or frowning displeasure of the day, the evening touches him, paints him dark and we are alone. "I just knew."

He doesn't say, that you were alone, that you were in pain. He doesn't have to, it breathes through the bright blue of his eyes against the sky. I close my own and lean against him as I would not and he clutches tighter. Behind my lids, the unmistakable feeling of being one takes hold, the coursing of his heart loud in my ear, the welcome scent of him even in all the sharp freshness of the winter night. A barrier the monsters won't cross. I wonder for a moment what it would be to never let this go. We say nothing more, not even when we part in the hall, his hand squeezing mine for the faintest of moments and then the connection lifted but not gone.

The blanket I am wrapped in his, still, the faint notes lingering.

I wonder idly if I am dreaming.

Goodnight.

H.L.

Chapter 9

Will

I expected Christmas in the castle to be lonely. The empty halls and classrooms, the echoes of voices all that's left of the students normally crowding my mind.

I mean, I understand, I do. Going home is a big expense, and for such a short time, plus Dad wrote me that he's trying to get a house. So I get it. But honestly, I expected to spend it holed up in Ravenclaw tower with a book.

Hannibal didn't go home—well, to his Aunt's rather, that's what he calls it on the rare occasion he mentions it, he never says 'home'—either. When I asked him why, over breakfast that we'd nicked and snuck out into the snowy courtyard, he shrugged and chewed thoughtfully. Finally, he took up his quill and wrote

I would rather be here. It is far too—here, his hand paused, twitched—*quiet there.*

I get the feeling that 'quiet' doesn't quite express what he meant, but I didn't press. Whatever his reasons, I'm glad he stayed.

My dad sent me "RISK," which I opened on Christmas Eve, as per our tradition. I tore open the paper, excited the second I saw the corner of the logo. It wasn't our box, but a new one. My own. Something about that was sad and faintly exciting at the same time.

We spent so many nights under the dim kitchen lighting of some apartment or another, playing that stupid game. I didn't get a lot of time with him when I was little, so on these nights, I would bask under the warm blanket of his attention, thinking the world was finally set right as he watched me with eyes so much like my own, and patiently put up with my small fingers fumbling over the tiny pieces. I liked to try to mimic him, in superman underwear and a tee, clutching the mug of cocoa which he called "cuppaJoe" while he drank real coffee.

He never let me win, in all those nights. I always went to bed thinking that my dad was wasted as a mechanic, that he could have been a great general, a battle-hardened commander, instead of a strong but weary man going grey before his time.

That is, until a few years later, when I finally started beating him.

It was just what I needed though; a little piece of home. I put on slippers and sent a note to Hannibal right away, of course, hoping that he'd still be up despite the hour. My dorm-mates have left for the holidays, so when I got back to the tower (armed with the mugs I'd kept from our chilly, impromptu picnic the other day) I pulled the desks together, set up the board, and waited nervously for him to show up.

When he did, sleep-rumpled and grouchy and pajama-clad as I'd hoped, I showed him the board, handed him a mug of cocoa (one thing I've found to consistently taste better in the magical world) and looked at him with what I hoped was enthusiasm, but probably bordered on desperation.

He accepted the mug gracefully, despite the slight stickiness that clung to the rim. Then, in his careful, ponderous way, took in my setup; the crinkled wrapping paper still on the ground, the disarray of my unmade bed, in contrast with the meticulous care with which I'd displayed the game.

He took a seat in the armchair I'd dragged to the makeshift table, and I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding.

I'd set a pad of paper next to that seat, and he noticed this with a smile.

From your father? he wrote, as I clambered over the desks to crouch in the window seat across from him. I nodded, tucking my chin over my knees, and didn't ask how he knew.

I explained the rules quickly, knowing he would pick it up, and we played.The first time, I beat him within twenty minutes, and he huffed.

This is a stupid game, he wrote, to my delight. As I'd anticipated, he asked if we could play again.

By the time our second game came to an end, our mugs were long empty, and the candles had all but burned down to stubs, leaving us under a low, flickering light. Christmas had fallen over Hogwarts without us even noticing. I won, but he was clearly a quicker study than I had been, and I was pretty sure he would take the next one if we kept going.

"Well played, Mr. Lecter," I yawned, untangling my stiff limbs and stretching in the drafty air, "One of the great tactical minds of our time."

He snorted. I like when he laughs—it's so rare. I wondered what his voice sounds like, if I'd ever hear it. I leaned my back against the cold windowpanes, shivering through my sweater. He was examining one of the little tanks with a furrowed expression; the one that means he's thinking.

"I know how smart you are, you know," I murmured distractedly, not knowing what prompted it. Maybe it was the late hour, my heavy eyelids, the contentedness that had smoothed over us, or the fact that it's true, and not nearly enough people tell him that. I bit my lip when he turned his eyes to me, sharply. Hannibal has a very intense gaze, one that my dad would say 'takes the moxie out of you,' and the way he looked at me then was… well, it was like I was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen. It was incredibly intimate, to be looked at that way. I felt my cheeks go hot, wondered if I should continue, but my mouth had already committed, so,

"And anyone who doesn't see that—well, that's their problem. They're just not paying enough attention."

Hannibal blinked, and his lips parted in a way that was surprisingly pleasing to me. I wanted to… I don't know what I wanted to do. No, that's a lie, but it sounds stupid. Damn, I— alright, I wanted to touch his mouth. Reach out my fingers and brush them across his lips, feel the way they moved under the pad of my thumb when he smiled, when he frowned.

I told you it was stupid.

Anyway, there I was, this intense and weird urge tingling in my hands, thanking god that he doesn't share my gift. And I laughed, an awkward bark of a laugh, because I didn't know what else to do.

"And then they'll realize what shitheads they've been," I added, ducking my head to carefully observe the Risk pieces, so I wouldn't see his face.

We played one more game. He won, of course. And when we fell asleep, I in my bed, and he in the one across from me because, as I told him, there was no point to him walking all the way back to the basement at that time of night, I dreamed everything in shades of red.

Chapter 10

Hannibal

We walk silently.

Partially because Bev has not quite mastered the art of writing whilst dodging those in her path, as Will has, weaving dangerously around anyone before him, a step left at the last moment to avoid collision, muttered apology to an almost-victim and then a sheepish grin at me, to see if I have noticed, and a shrug of his shoulder in irreverence when he sees that I have.

I'm not always clumsy, you know. Sometimes, unavoidable, the slam comes despite his efforts, and a bruise accrues all the same, then I write with pursed lips that he should have more care and he shakes his stubborn head. *But we're talking*, his scrunched up letters form, my hand shooting out to snatch him out of the path of a suit of armor. It pleases me, secretly, or perhaps not quite that secretly, to be the most important thing.

It is not so with Bev.

Which is not to say we are not...on some path towards the, still elusive, verging on impossible, to me, conception of friendship which Will snatches for himself so readily. More comfort with her than with the rest, more time spent acclimating to one another. But we seem to have reached an understanding of amiability, and neither one of us quite knows how to, or perhaps has desire to, traverse past the boundaries of that.

So while we decide with a nod to walk from the common room to where we are meeting him together, the obvious course of action, we do not converse. Not strained nor easy, still waiting, hovering in middle ground. Instead, she fiddles with the strap of her bag, taps aimless rhythms against her thigh, and I gaze outwardly around us.

No sooner, it would seem, have the preparations for one holiday ended, than the markings for the next one appear. And though I knew of this, Saint Valentine's Day, before attending, I have never before seen it perpetuated to such garish degree as it at Hogwarts. Everywhere, *everywhere*, hideous bubblegum pink hearts have appeared, floating aimlessly and threatening passerby (and certainly Will, who has almost stuck to one of them many a time, in his thoughtless walking.) clashing horribly with red (Pink and red is an unbearably atrocious combination.) swathes of fabric that coat the windows and the shimmering white confetti that falls suddenly from the doorways at the most unexpected moments. And. Then. Proceeds. To. Cling. (Will thought it was ever so funny when I walked into Defense, the top half of me dusted as though with snow and sparkling.

New look? He'd written, laugh hidden from the unamused professor eyeing us with a glare. In retaliation, I smeared some across his nose, pleased when it stuck. Then it was, admittedly, funny. My glare and his smirk trading places.)

The worst is however... I reach for her sleeve and she turns surprised to look at me.

"Hannibal- wha" But she sees it too by then and her eyes widen comically.

It is one of those demons, who I sometimes wish I could simply smite from the air, put into the sweets that it won't stop simpering about. An enchanted Cupid, a twin of the dozens warbling around the halls. Too many twittering about for my tastes, butchering arias their voices could not hope to do justice to, shooting arrows that bounce rubber off of students, and corralling the unwary into the trap of their enchantment. I do not know so much about love, journal, I will admit, but in all my studies of ages more romantic than ours, this is certainly not what is called for.

It flies around us now, circles too fast for any motion to be made to step away and screeches, its ugly wings flapping,

“A KISS. A KISS.”

“GIVE US A KISS.”

I know that if either one of us was experiencing anything more than the mere irritation we were feeling, the magic would fade. But our base of annoyance seems to only strengthen it. Annoyance appears to do that, that… that or desire, but I do not believe there is any of the latter to be found here between us.

But it is not sentient, merely spelled to continue to aggravate until its goal is met.

"Uh-" Bev starts as she's pushed against me by the flap of the wing. "I guess we could..."

But I pull a face at that suggestion, certainly not. Instead, I reach for her hand and raise it slowly, to allow her to pull away and slap me, or whatever dramatics would be called for, in protest, but she only watches with that funny curious gaze of hers and so I bring it to my lips. Very gallantly, I am capable of charm, and kiss her hand.

The Cupid swears, rather ungenerous language and, disappointed by our lackluster performance, whirls away. As he goes, Bev pulls out her wand, and with a whisper of words, (For a moment, the magic before me whirls envy, cloying hunger, through my mind, so casually performed, how I wish...), sends sparks out toward it which paint its wings black, and trace white skulls with their tongues sticking out across the feathers.

No less garish, but...

It turns its head, screeching again, but we've already dodged away. Running down a side corridor and ducking behind a flower adorned statue of a stag. She's giggling breathless as we pause for breath, and even I am smiling, not the usual brand of warmth, not nearly so seeping, not of the kind that whispers through me and softens all the edges, but some kind of affection borne into me all the same.

I pull out my notebook to write. *We are fortunate it was not more insistent. Some of them are true terrors.*

"Yeah, eesh I've seen them throw tantrums, but if we really didn't want to it'd have gone all defunct. So -" She winks, bats her eyelashes with swooning exaggeration and I roll my eyes as she continues. "But, I guess it wouldn't be good to get trapped with the wrong person, even if the thought doesn't horrify you." A conspirators smile to me as though I understand.

But I do not.

The wrong person? I write after a pause.

"Not the person you *really* want to kiss, I mean." And she gestures back to herself as though to indicate she is not that person. Which would of course imply that there is that person and -

Fingers moving again before I can think on it too much. I should not have to think on it at all, but -

I do not wish to kiss anyone.

She reads it with a strange look on her face, as though I have written a statement of the highest levels of absurdity - and not mere fact.

"Uh-" Her words too are dubious, slow and an odd sort of pinched. She resists pressing some issue obscured to me, it would seem, as she chews on her words. "Sure, Hannibal, of course not." And then recovering her normal drawl, smiles brightly if a little false. "Something for us mere mortals, right?"

I consider simply letting the words fall flat, the first impulse, but I understand better than that now, and instead allow a smirk and a tilt of my head. Put on my best "alien face," as she refers to it, to renewed gales of her laughter and push us back to safer ground.

When it has faded and the coast would seem to be clear, I indicate in the direction of the Great Hall with a hand.

Will is waiting, after all. And I have not seen him all day. Something to be remedied, I should think.

Chapter 11

Will

Bev is a very bad influence.

And wicked good at cards, as it turns out. We snuck into the caved-in passage behind the mirror on the third floor the night she got back. A good deal of the castle was still home for Christmas, and many of the teachers had been in, well, very good *spirits* (the kind that comes in a bottle) so there was nobody to stop us as she, Hannibal, Brian, Jimmy, and I made our quiet way through the halls, clinking and sloshing bottles of butterbeer and a deck of Exploding Snap in tow.

Oddly, while Hannibal is very particular about his own rules, he seems to have no problem breaking others, and in fact gets a kind of thrill from it. (I can assure you; it's strong enough that it buzzes pleasantly behind my eyes when I'm with him, cueing unnecessary adrenaline.) So he was in a particularly good mood as we crept along the halls, grinning at me when we had to press into a doorway to avoid the caretaker, bumping my shoulder as we ducked behind the mirror.

It's nice, actually. He's been a little distant recently, ever since that day at the quidditch pitch (long story; let's just say it has to do with Molly Foster and me being, well, kind of rude). I've missed him. On the same note though, I know that we're basically best friends, but it's not fair of him to get mad at me for meeting new people. I mean, it's not like I'm going to forget him, so he's completely overreacting.

Right?

Well anyways, after all the cards had more or less blown up, leaving us giggly and our nerves raw, and Bev had robbed us of all the trinkets we'd brought to wager with (breaking several school rules at once, if I'm correct) she sighed.

"Well, that was easier than I expected."

Brian groaned—a few of his more rare chocolate frog cards were now lying in the pile she picked through.

I was sitting with my back against the rough-hewn wall, Hannibal next to me. Our legs were touching, at the knee, and I kept thinking I should shift, but somehow lacked the motivation to do so. Something—probably the butterbeer—had made my limbs lazy and pliant, and if he didn't mind (which he didn't seem to, didn't even seem to notice, in fact) then I sure as hell didn't.

"You're a monster," Jimmy grumbled at Bev, and I heard Hannibal huff a laugh in agreement. He'd lost a few good quills and a box of chocolates to her pile, all I'd wagered were a few old comics. Bev laughed, delighted.

“Boys, boys. You think I wouldn’t give you a chance to get your stuff back?”

Brian looked at her sharply, or rather, looked at his cards. She split the stuff in front of her into four piles, seemingly at random.

“So here’s the deal,” she explained, eyes glittering in the lantern-light, “If you answer a question, you get a pile. Refuse the question, you get a task. No chickening out, or you don’t get your stuff. Ever.”

Brian winced as the last syllable snapped, sharp and permanent, from her mouth. When I looked across at Hannibal, he seemed intrigued.

“But our stuff’s all mixed together,” Jimmy near-whined, and Bev’s grin widened.

“Oh well, Price. I guess you guys will have to play each other too. What a shame.”

At this point, I was interested too. I liked the idea of being able to ask things frankly, not having to pretend to be unaware of the underlying currents that dictate their dynamics with each other. I cautioned another glance at Hannibal, whose eyes were far-off. I wondered if he was having the same thought.

“Alright, to make it fair, I’ll throw my stuff in too,” Bev conceded after a moment, her lip caught beneath her teeth, “Now who’s gonna go first?”

After Jimmy had confessed his love for bees (not much of a secret, in my opinion), Brian and I each had to tell about an embarrassing moment (easy for me—I have a wealth of them to share), and Hannibal had turned down Bev’s question in favor of a dare (sneaking out to steal us more snacks), we all had an approximation of our things, with a few notable exceptions.

Brian scowled as Jimmy held aloft one of his cards, twirling it back and forth to dislodge the stodgy-looking warlock within.

“*Okay*, okay,” he begged, arms out, “What do you want to know?”

Jimmy’s smugness was coy and clear on his face, lending it a new, dangerous look that I don’t think I’ve seen him wear before or since. I had the distinct feeling of a trap snapping closed.

“Truth. Have you ever thought about anyone in this room in an… *indelicate* way?”

Beside me, Hannibal straightened, surprise warring with distaste on his features. I nearly laughed; once again, not much of a challenge, in my mind. I knew for a fact— but then again, not everyone has the pleasure of sifting through other people’s qualia like I do. I waited.

“No, that’s—” Brian spluttered, looking to me, then to Bev, wide-eyed, “you can’t…”

“Answer it, or take your dare, if you ever want to see…” Jimmy looked quickly at the card, “Cyprion Youdle again,”

I watched Brian. If he turned down the question, he was basically admitting guilt, but then he wouldn't be subjected to further questions about it. The same thing seemed to cross his mind as he licked his lips, considering.

"Dare. Give me the dare."

"Kiss me."

I looked sharply at Bev, to see her mouth fall open, incredulous but pleased. A startled laugh fell from Brian's lips, but Jimmy watched him, his normally open features serious.

Beside me, Hannibal had tensed all through, and there was a foreign anxiousness twining its way into his limbs, evident in the unhappy twist of his lips, the uncharacteristic flush to his cheeks.

"Guys," I started, alarmed by his reaction, "Maybe we should—"

"Okay," Brian interrupted with a shrug, and before I knew it, he'd leaned across the chamber, grabbed Jimmy's collar, and kissed him, brusquely, on the lips.

I think even Jimmy was surprised by the casualness of it, I felt it jolt him, distantly, and then surprise began to melt into something else, something soft and warm that pulled at me, spreading color through my face. I sucked in a sharp breath and scrabbled blindly for walls, for distance that only came as Brian snatched the card from Jimmy's hand, and pulled back with a triumphant crow.

It felt very hot suddenly. I realized Hannibal had been watching me, not them, was probably aware of what had just happened, and when he nodded a silent question of concern, I looked down to see my hand clutched in his sleeve. I flexed my fingers, attempted a shrug and a grin that only flickered for the briefest of moments.

I wish that I could say that nobody else was aware of my little indiscretion, but I'm pretty sure that Bev knows too. I looked across at her and could all but hear the gears clicking away in her head, behind that that crooked little smirk.

I'm in bed now, finally. It's still empty here, and the contrast is sharp from how warm it seemed the other night ~~when Hannibal was in the next bed~~. The wind seems louder through the windows, and the mattress has a seemingly endless amount of lumps in it; I haven't been able to sleep at all, despite the faint, pale light at the horizon that suggests sunrise is not far off. I keep agonizing over that moment, when that warm pleasure filled my chest, almost painful, and Hannibal saw it written across my face. There's shame, and embarrassment, and worse, not all of the thoughts that keep intruding—ones that I have to accept as my own, given there's nobody here to suggest anything—are unpleasant. Some of them feel like… like the nights when I'm pulled from sleep, some restless aching in my limbs and lungs, telling me to wander, knowing I'll find Hannibal somewhere, cold and haunted by nightmares. Terrifying but comforting. Yearning, even though I know I shouldn't.

I think I'm falling apart.

Chapter 12

Hannibal

Show me.

I demand, as he moves to hide his hand behind his back. Write it again, larger, in a hurried scrawl. All my wiring is punctuated, but the period comes out especially dark this time. The ink threatening to rip through the notebook page.

Show me.

He pulls a face, grimaces, as though I have demanded something cruel and unusual of him, with a shake of his head. We are still moving in a ridiculous circle around the room, one of my steps forward for one of his steps around. With a growl I attempt to catch a glimpse, but he's rounded on his heel, and it is only the stubborn set of his face before me.

"No, Hannibal it's fine, it's just a little burn."

I hold up the page again, glaring and he huffs.

"I've burned myself hundreds of times at home."

As though *that* will appease me.

"I'll just run some cold water on it -"

He tapers off as I start writing again.

And what, precisely, is water going to do?

"I don't know, it'll -" But he's relenting, I can see already. "Make it not throb as much, or -" Even more mumbling and his arm is twitching. "Something…" He moves it only slightly, but assent enough for me, and I've pounced forward, dropping my pen and paper, to reach for his wrist before he can turn away again, the slight crackle of atmosphere that always starts at unexpected touch thrums as stoked coals leaping, but then quiets again, and it is merely he, drawn eyes and bit lip, and me, looking at the stretch of darkened skin that ridges from his knuckles and down.

Just a little burn. I tell him with my eyes because I cannot let go to gather my things and write. He shrugs his shoulders. I know it hurts.

With care not to allow the frustration at his general tendency to be careless with himself to roughen my movements, I examine it slowly, run the pads of my fingers along the edges, lean in to see how many layers of skin it has roughened and charred. I do not like the blackened

edges of smoke, I do not like the wince he tries to hide, I do not like it, and the dislike swells in me, churns, suddenly roiling, into anger.

What has—

What could have—

"It was just a Heliopath, Hannibal. Care of Magical Creatures can apparently be kind of rough." He reads me even with my head bowed, and my shoulders stiffen to indicate I'm listening, as my thoughts running to the little fire spirit in the book propped on his lap last night. An unseen frown. "It couldn't help itself."

He laughs, intercut by a hiss, and then he's closer. His body shifting into mine, the familiar smell of him, though touched of flame, surrounding. Soft. "Don't start planning murder just yet."

Strange cadence in speech, something wearier and wiser about it than the usual turns of his voice, but also the lilt of constant fondness, rife with an undercurrent of something that melts: hints of flush, of heat.

I want to tell him, in words, I wish to make them, that his pain twists through me as though it were my own, that I do not want him to be in it, that fire creature or not, it ought not to have dared. But these seem like silly things to write, and I cannot. Though they curve around my tongue, and it longs, I cannot say them.

So instead I bring him over slowly to the bed, tug him down and reach again for my discarded journal.

Sit. Still. Sit still.

A tongue out in answer, but he complies, watches as I unearth a trunk from under my bed, and pull out all manner of items I am not supposed to have. Dittany, borrowed when the Professor's back was turned, essence of Comfrey, well only half the amount was truly required for what we had been brewing in class, hardly my fault, and very careless to be so wasteful, dried bitterroot, lifted from the stores, morning dew, of my own devices, thank you very much, let it not be said that I am lazy. Better used for purely cosmetic potions, but in a way, there is a desired cosmetic component to this also.

The burn, though large, is thankfully not as deep as it had seemed.

"God, Hannibal." Delight paints his voice, and I'm pleased to have been responsible for putting it there. Then, something like a groan. "Do I have to be worried what they'll find if they happen to raid your things?"

I pause in the rummaging to smirk, turn back to him.

No, of course not. Whyever would you think that?

Then casually set a bag of something that may or may not, possibly, in some fashion, perhaps be converted into a potion of unpleasant results.

Another groaned laugh and I am grinning at him over my shoulder at him as well, our temporary ire forgotten in the face of the way we always seem to ease around each other. But at the bite back of pain from him, I return to the task at hand. Medicine first.

“You don’t have to do this, you know.”

His voice is a little tentative now, though the warmth of chuckles lives in it still. I pull a shoulder up to my ear. Of course I do, necessary. I cannot allow him to hurt, I cannot allow him to— A little pinch, a half spoon more, a little stir. A wait. Best to focus on the even motion of my fingers than the strange whirls of my mind.

“I’d have gone to the hospital wing,” The words themselves seem to scrape at the back of his throat. “Eventually.”

Untruth.

I want to. I hope the back of my head conveys. *I have to.*

“But it’s uhm -” The flush that I cannot see but sense reaching all the way across the room to touch me. And then. “Nevermind.”

I wish to press, but instead, I simply continue to brew, well, *mix* more like, a knife from nowhere to juice a root, separate a stalk, the pressure of a gaze drawing onto my hands as they work, more than curiosity, something heavier I cannot place, more flush, more heat, a bare waft of scent with spice. If I turned, I am certain I would find him staring intently, a gaze that comes over him more and more of late, echoing. But even looking, I am certain I would still fail to understand what it is. And I do not enjoy that, not understanding, so I do not. Merely continue until the paste is thick, sticky and seeping.

In a flash, I am before him again, forgo a spoon for my fingers, and spread the balm along his injured skin, and more, and then my hand there, and my other one, around his, to hold it in place.

“Hannibal.” My name whispers from his lips in a sigh of unbearable relief, but not purely relief, a nudge of distraction, and the distant roll of a storm, I tighten grip without thinking. To press the cream, I assure myself, more relief, his shoulder slumping, eyes falling shut, satisfied sounds from his lips. But even to myself, I am uncertain if this is true.

I only want to be near him. That is all I know. Does there have to be anything more?

“One day, I’ll take care of you too.” He tells me, in the delirious peace the sudden lifting of pain brings. One lid cracking open to show he is serious.

Determined.

And I—

Okay. I mouth.

Shock and then joy as the other eye opens, just to be sure he was not dreaming.

I don’t usually do it. Tiresome to mouth, too much effort, for too little understanding. Something that rings of failure about the motions that should but do not produce the desired results. But I do not wish to let go, and I want, for once, to be able to answer.

He smiles at me, suddenly bright. Beaming at what I’ve given, and that a little movement of my lips is enough to draw that from him and he mouths it back to me. My own mouth curving, enough for a flash of teeth.

I do believe I am lost. The thought ebbs through me, unbidden. And though in what fashion exactly it does not clarify, I recognize it to be true. Or perhaps, with more accuracy. I have always been lost, and now, it would seem, I am lost with someone.

I should let go.

He should ask me to.

But we stay.

Still, together.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will

I can't believe it. I still can't believe it. ~~I am~~, ~~Hannibal and~~ It's—well, okay, hang on. I'll start from the beginning.

I left my Charms book in the classroom. It was just a dumb little detail, a mistake, but Molly was talking to me about the homework assignment, and I guess I was probably distracted. I had to double back, cursed and told Hannibal to go ahead to lunch (he didn't) and that I'd be right back (I wasn't).

I guess Sneed was waiting for me. Maybe he'd seen me leave the book, or maybe he'd just followed me back, split from the crowd, and waited. Maybe he just likes hanging out in the halls between class, I dunno, he's a strange guy. All I know is, I'd pissed him off today because the professor had asked for an answer he didn't know, to the amusement of much of the class, and then when he called on me next (probably assuming—rightly—that despite my derisive snort, I also had no idea what the four main elements of a supersensory charm are) I had the exact correct answer. Well, I have Hannibal for a deskmate, and he had the correct answer in his notes, helpfully shoved against my elbow.

But the book, the hallway, and Hannibal.

I recovered my forgotten book from the empty classroom, closed the door, and made for the Great Hall, totally unaware of the whisper of robes behind me.

And then someone shouted my name. The sound of it, a voice I didn't recognize, strangely pleasing twined through the familiar syllable, echoed brittle and afraid down the hall just as Sneed raised his wand arm. I turned, feeling the prickle of the spell against my neck as it passed and, without thinking, murmured a counter-curse, sending the lank-haired boy flying with the force of it.

For a second, I was as stunned as if his spell had found its mark, just stood there, not really processing. But quickly, as Sneed scrambled back to his feet, cursing, I realized I should probably get out of there, before he got bold again. Or worse, before a teacher found us like this, wands drawn.

So I ran. Hannibal was there at the end of the hall, had apparently hovered there, indecisive, while I dawdled behind, and as I grabbed his arm, tugging him along with me, the pieces fell together. It couldn't have been anyone else. He. *He* had said my name, shouted it, to warn me. It seemed impossible, but no one else was there, and if I needed more proof, my heart pounding, the shock loud in my ears, it came when he said it again, this time gasped as we skidded round a corner.

“Will,” Repeated, his face flushed, pleased, and with the sound of pounding footsteps behind us, we stumbled into a broom closet, pulled the door closed behind us.

It was dim, lit only by the light that leaked in under the door, and close; our backs to the wall, pressed uncomfortably between cleaning supplies that looked as though they hadn’t seen the outside world in some time. As Sneed’s angry threats echoed uselessly through the hall outside and started to fade, I laughed. I couldn’t help it, I laughed until my sides ached, in disbelief at our luck, my spell, Hannibal’s voice…

“When did you…?” I asked, breathless. He shrugged, head falling back against the wall while his breath caught up. A rare full, toothy grin brightened his face, and then he seemed to remember what he’d just done.

“I couldn’t …” he said, before the words caught there. His voice is surprisingly low, gravelly almost, though that could be from the lack of use. I committed the sound of it to memory, the way the accent I had not expected and couldn’t place shortened the consonants, curved the familiar sounds into something new and thrilling. His brow furrowed, trying to call up the rest.

Between us, our hands brushed.

That tug in my chest was there, suddenly, and that charge of proximity, a dull longing for… for what, I don’t know, whenever he’s near me. And only him. A feeling of too much; too much adrenaline, and shock, and… and *affection*, yes, I think I can safely call it that, bubbling over, and suddenly the inches between us felt too far, the lack of contact almost painful, and I…

Well, to just say that I kissed him would be a gross understatement.

My hands cupped his face—and when I say *they* did, not I, that’s intentional. I had no idea what I was doing, except that I had to, and it felt right, at last, my hand on his cheek like that’s where it belonged. Where it’s always belonged. And he stilled, no words here, only a curious dark look, his eyes heavy and searing. We were balanced on the edge of something very new here. And still, I just wanted to be closer, so then I stepped so that our chests were almost touching, all of this in the smallest fraction of time—too quickly—and yes, I did. I leaned up, pressed my lips against his. I’ve never done that, never even really wanted to, but for one moment, it was *relief*, and I understood that ache I felt when we were near, it had been because we were close enough to touch and yet weren’t. And now, this. For a moment, nothing else mattered, nothing except the soft, sweet pressure of his mouth and the shuddering breath that left him.

As I said, for one moment. Because then I pulled away, replacing the space between us, and I felt, beneath my own whirling and ecstatic mind, his quiet thrum of surprise, contemplation... *discomfort.*

“Will,” he whispered again, voice growling in a pleasing way, eyes flickering to meet mine. There was hesitancy, a warning in his tone.

And then I remembered that I was standing in a broom closet with Hannibal Lecter, my best friend. Hannibal Lecter, who had once watched a couple kiss in the Great Hall with a wrinkled nose, and written *a fine way to pass viruses.*

Hannibal, who I—

I'm such an idiot.

My hands fell to my sides. I took another step back. Space. Walls. The River.

I'm fine.

"Sorry," I laughed, and it was hollow. I knew he would hear the empty notes, could probably see the flush creeping down my neck. Shame and embarrassment replaced the roaring want from seconds before, I had been presumptuous, but I had thought—for a second… It doesn't matter. I wished the ground would swallow me up. "Just—just got carried away. Probably an empathy thing."

I gestured vaguely to the hall beyond the door, knowing full well we were alone. Half-truths and gilded laughter, that's what I resorted to. A poorly painted facade. He deserves better than that, he deserves honesty, but honesty is what I pressed between our lips. So until it's not anymore, until I can look at him and honestly say that I don't ache for him, lies it is.

He smiled, though his eyes were still wary.

When we stepped back into the world beyond the door, a world that looked gray, washed out, as my eyes adjusted to the light, it was like it had happened in another life, to another Will Graham. He hasn't brought it up since, and I'm sure as hell not going to. Luckily, there's been some small amount of distraction with his newfound ability, words coming hesitantly, but having voice now, at last. The others are all very keen to help him, trying out new words, and he is thrilled, of course, to be able to murmur a spell.

But my name was the first thing on his tongue.

Chapter End Notes

I sincerely thought about adding what was originally the working title of this chapter, "In the Broom Closet," but decided that since we've stuck with just the chapter numbers to this point, it might be overkill. But there you go, you now know the joke was totally made.
—Q

Chapter 14

Hannibal

I - I am considering...I am unsure what exactly. I had thought, friendship, enough of an outlier to my expectations. But acceptable. I have accepted it, despite my reservations, the occasional burst of something more painful, uglier, than my former rippleless existence created on me. And yet, now?

You do not dream, journal. You are little more than pages, maybe alive once, in the way all things are in nature, but no longer. Pounded into sheets for my ink to cover. But I dream, and they are not all frigid landscapes and barren, fading, screams that I cannot tie together into cohesion. (And I admit, of late, have been distracted from attempting to.) No, sometimes there is fire instead, flame that surrounds me, bare, licks against my skin but doesn't burn as the ice does, doesn't leave searing marks, but consumes me in its own way, sinks beneath my skin and I welcome it, crave the sinuous curves of its touch. Upon wakening, I find myself distracted and empty, aching, as though something has been lost with the quieting of my brain's illusions, sweating, (as though I were Will), and longing for something with no more name to me than the shatters of my memory.

That is, I believe, what this is, what I am considering. Not friendship, the curve of breath against my cheek returning to me now, as I sit, slipping out of the hearth behind my skull and creeping out into the churn of my thoughts. The closeness of another significant body to mine, one whose presence is loud to me even with my eyes shut, slit into cracks after a gasping breath, and the softness of lips against mine. Melting, a moment, the prolonged gasp of a kiss, and then freezing. The elation that surrounded us moments ago, speech, (I have spoken! And I am only too distracted to revel properly in the idea), all of it fading away, narrowing to this point around us. He is as he always is, radiant, drawing, but this is more than a longing to curve my fingers through the twine of his thoughts, find pattern in the powers he does not understand. This is so very visceral, a raw reaching of my senses, I would dare—though it seems almost laughable, the very idea—normal. But I am so disconnected from the notion of the mundane that I do not even begin to know how to approach.

And Will knows, of course he knows, can sense the absence of understanding, the confusion that still reigns now when I think of it, I am sure it broadcasts loudly to him. Those feelings, or the absences of correct response. But have I ever been correct? The sensations tantalize, they are new, the longing, what I wish? At present only to pull them apart to their component elements, find what this new connection is composed of, why it tastes so unique, different from before, and yet every bit as familiar. The same parts, rearranged for a new perspective.

His fingers had wrapped around mine, and for a heartbeat, I pulled, drew him closer on instinct I cannot name, but only blinked, watched him silently where perhaps I ought to have acted. It is not like me to be rife with indecision. He spoke nothing as well, both of us standing, neither of us sure, the hallway swimming into a dream. I wonder if I visit it now, will it be only plain wall and stone again? It seemed suspended, the first cool whispers of

spring flooding the cracks of the castle, the promise of summer, as bright as the flames. And still, my mind wanders back to the moment just after, before the confusion, to the reckless laughter, the flush of our skin, Will's glittering eyes, the way he looked at me when I repeated his name.

Will, I murmur it now, to myself, because I have already said it and my mouth remembers the motions, my throat does not rebel. I do not yet know if I am ready for any others, foreign encroachments along my lips. Perhaps this is only a fluke, perhaps the sound will fade. It is too soon to know. But in this moment, I can say *Will* and so I do, my tongue to the roof of my mouth, wrapping around the syllables, the sound, my own sound, wrapping around my ears. It sounds of triumph, tastes sweet. It is only a word—to me, perhaps the most significant of them—but all the same, only one and so small. But I cannot keep the grin from spreading. One more shatter in place. (And to see Sneed's surprised face, Will's proud one, and the hex that he managed to throw in his pleasure...well. I am proud as well.)

I do not know what I am considering. But I believe I wish I did.

Only time will tell.

H.L

Chapter 15

Will

It was unreasonably nice out today. I love this time of year, but at the same time, the warm, summery breeze and happy shouts of post-exam laughter lodge a cold wedge in my chest. There's only a week until the end of the term. Only a week, and then three months of solitude. I envy the others and their proximity to home; Bev is already making plans to see Brian and Jimmy over break. It's a lot easier when there's not an ocean between you.

I think that Hannibal knows what I'm feeling. I've caught him watching me, brows pulled into that concerned face he makes, when he thinks I can't see. I wonder if he'll see the others while I'm away, who he spends time with each summer, why he never mentions them in his letters. It has occurred to me that maybe he doesn't. I've seen his scars; the one on his neck was visible today, pale and twisting across warm skin where his usually buttoned-up collar fell loose. I've felt the pull of his nightmares late at night, the dreams that end with high, panicked screaming and terrible cold. I think he has his reasons for silence and solitude, and while he doesn't seem to mind breaking them for me, I'm not sure he's extended that courtesy to others yet.

But still. It's a new summer, and with the boundary of speech removed, who's to say he won't reach out to someone closer? I try to tell myself it wouldn't bother me.

I think it goes without saying, it would.

While we sat, enjoying the sunshine, in the soft, fresh-smelling grass near the rock ring (still one of my favorite scents, despite my lawn mowing adventures last summer) all these things were swirling through my head. The lazy spring air was making me sleepy, the impromptu game of shuntbumps some of the students were playing tempting, but much more fun to watch from a distance. Molly was among them; I could hear her squealed laughter as she darted between those who tried to unseat her, hair shimmering brightly.

When Hannibal seemed to tire of the book in his lap very suddenly (something about magical theory in folklore) he nudged me to my feet, beckoned for me to follow him. He seems to still be more comfortable without words sometimes, so I didn't ask where we were going, just let him lead me.

We skimmed the lake, past the groundskeeper's cottage, and towards the woods, the sounds of the other students fading behind us. I was starting to wonder if he was leading us into the forest when we topped a rocky outcrop, just within the first sparse cover of trees, and he sat down on the edge, watching the grass just below his dangling feet with a little, flickering smile.

He tugged me down to sit beside him, pulling my sleeve.

"Look," he grinned, and I did.

They were small, about five or six of them snuffling through the grass with their long, reaching snouts and watery little eyes. I laughed as one of them noticed us, walked up and sniffed at my feet until I reached down to brush fingers lightly across its back. It seemed indifferent, searching mine and then Hannibal's pant cuffs with its snout.

"Nifflers?" I asked. I'd only seen them once before, in class. He nodded, grinning.

"One of them got into my bag and nearly made off with my inkwell. I thought you'd like them, if they were still here."

For some reason, that made warmth bloom in my cheeks.

We watched them until they apparently grew bored with us, and scurried off to a greener patch of shade. I lay back in the grass, arms above my head, and let my heavy eyelids fall closed. I wanted to keep this moment somehow, bottle it up to revisit when I felt alone. The dappled sun, the nifflers, the fact that Hannibal had thought of me. I heard him sigh, and felt the whisper of grass and fabric as he lay down as well, next to me, unbothered apparently by the prospect of dirt this late in the year.

I smiled. That well of affection that I know now to be completely my own built, although there was something else just beneath. Something dangerous and consuming that reminded me of the moment that didn't happen. This, I pushed down, wary of boundaries crossed. If this is all there is… maybe that's alright. I looked at him, his eyes closed against the dappled sun, his face relaxed, soft. A smile resting there. It hurt, that familiar twist in my chest, some emotion that I'm not ready to examine pulling through me and turning soft longing into agony, but, with a slow breath, it was manageable. I would rather have him like this—happy, it seems—than not at all. And haven't we always been?

I still sometimes wonder… wish, I guess. I see others, and I wish that someone would look at me like that. I wish for touch. I wish that I could believe that I'm something worth touching, someone that makes him *want* to hold me close the way that I—

But as I said. He sensed my gaze and I locked all of that away as eyes, turned amber by the light flickered to me, questioning. A smile, a smile returned. And that's something itself. A small truth, a warm bloom. A moment shared, among many we've had and many that, if I can keep myself from making things unbearably awkward, I'm sure will come. No sense in ruining a perfect moment with the subtle ache for more.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal

"Will."

I murmur it in his ear, now and again, because it always draws a smile from him, wide and brimming, magnificent, no matter where we are or how he is feeling. The sound of the word on my tongue draws him from poor moods and from the depths of emotions not his own, brings him back to awareness. ~~To me~~. I am certain he wishes there was something that would pull me out of mine as surely, but I am glad to have this trick for him, and without shame, I abuse it.

I do it now. He seems far, gone somewhere I cannot follow, down the twisting trails of his mind and I sense, because I know Will, more perhaps, than I know myself, that this is not a case of borrowed unhappiness. That whatever threads the furrows through his brow, frowns down his lips, is his own and no one else's. But it could be mine, I wish to say, if only he would tell me what is at issue. We could correct it together, there is little—though even as I write these words, I frown and think of quidditch pitches, long legs, and windswept pony tails, wonder, the thoughts suddenly sour inside the ridges of mind, if it is her, or her lack, that upsets him so. Wonder, though I do not like her, I admit, why it further upsets me so, to consider that.

(On the topic of erm, considerations, Will has not...referenced...our...happening, since the moment in the closet. After agonizing about it for the remainder of the evening, a sort of strange, wild, excitement dawning slow in my chest as the sun rose, when I saw him next, it was as it had always been. Nothing changed in the slightest, well, nothing except the tiniest of flushes at breakfast, only the merest traces of blood vessels swelling, and then all as usual. Perhaps I was only foolishly fretting. That...must have been it. Excitement, adrenaline, I know how they can alter a mind. I have attempted to cease dwelling on it, to resume interaction as he has, with the specific understanding we have not changed in our relationship, nor do we intend to. But the creep of that...something, that visceral connection, the odd aura of...hope? I barely know what it is to hope, but there's a low pang of something sometimes, that murmurs soft, like the first warm wind of spring through winter, of maybe. I like to think that is hope. But hope for what? I still do not know. It might be easier to work towards understanding together, but alone? I believe it an impossibility. The dreams of fire sear strong in me in the nights, and sometimes, sometimes, I admit, though I think it weakness, I awake and want for touch with an ache that curls through every cell in my body, to have another close. But I have never wished for that, nor do I believe, I want it. The thought of another in my spaces is nearly distasteful, though of course, I allow Will in them without a second thought, and when he stepped against me, that was not—)

In any case, he has turned to me now, smiling, though the exhaustion has not completely left his eyes, a little wan, though it grows as I say it again. Occasionally, journal, not talking was a much less complicated way of existence. I would have simply written, *What is wrong*? with a flourish and an impatient blink, and he would have responded in kind. Now I must choose words that I cannot think through, must say them without seeing them first, and while I do not have much care, generally. (Though I might not have told Bev that horses eat more politely than she does.) It matters with Will. Matters doubly when he is upset and will not confide. *Compassion, concern*. Those are what these emotions are. I truly did not think myself capable.

In the end, I merely look at him. And he looks back. A battle of patience which he always loses.

A sigh.

“It’s gonna be summer soon.”

His legs draw into his chest, bent at the knee. Pink light pours through the window, drapes across his curls, along his skin, the golden notes of sunset. I paint the image mentally into a tower of my castle. Hastily adjust the strokes as he turns to look at me. His eyes are so exquisitely blue, journal, the way I imagine the oceans he speaks of sometimes, sometimes calm and deep, others stormy and grey. My breath catches, I think I want to kiss him, somewhere deep. He’s too distracted to register the wisp of sensation, thankfully, or at least, he says nothing of it. I fade it as much as I possibly can, bury it away.

“I’ll miss you.”

It is time to abandon my place at his desk, I think. Good evening, journal. You may imagine us, sitting together silently as the sky goes dark.

H.L.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to everyone who has kept with us so far; your insights and reactions really make this worthwhile. We also squealed at many of the same moments you did, cried at others. ~~especially some of the ones coming up oops~~. Drop by the tumblr to check for more art, ask a question, or to receive updates! --> [X]

This does officially tie up their third year—but not to worry, they'll be back very soon! Year Four will start posting early next week and, as per tradition, will update twice a week. I hope you'll stick with them, as we have. I promise it's worthwhile.

We'll see you on the train.
—Q

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!